

# SECTION 4 :

# E-PARTICIPATION

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### **E-Public Participation: *Setting the Stage for Success***

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The Internet is no longer a novelty; it is very much a part of our daily lives. Email is becoming a key communication tool. It is common now for women to have an email address for work and one for personal use. Statistics Canada Household Internet Use Survey 2001 found that 7.2 million households had at least one member who used the Internet regularly. The Canada Case Study (c2001) states “women currently outnumber men among Internet users, 51% to 49%”.

Women, in their multiple roles, use the Internet for different purposes, from email for business

communication to strengthening family ties; from searching for information for their jobs or to help with their children's homework; from connecting with family members and friends, and making new friends, to participating in online discussions for social and business purposes. Women who are not living in their country of origin use the Internet to access news from their native land in their native tongue.

It is difficult to say how most women are introduced to the Internet. Was it for personal use or for work-related tasks? Many of the women with whom I have worked in smaller nonprofit organizations have learned how to use the Internet at home rather than at work. These women have access to the Internet because of their spouses and children. The skills that they develop at home are then applied in the workplace as their organizations get connected to the Internet.

In the past decade, I have volunteered and worked with several non-government organizations as they have discovered applications for the Internet in their agencies. Development of VIOLET, a site for women on partner abuse, introduced computers and the Internet to women's shelters in Alberta. VIOLETForum was created as the on-line consultation component of VIOLET to encourage women to connect and discuss issues with each other. RoseNet took learnings from VIOLET and applied them in the context of immigrant women. A non-profit, charitable organization operated by and for immigrant women, Changing Together: A Centre for Immigrant Women, assisted in the development of the project and acquired and applied new skills in the process. Working with an advisory committee consisting of community representatives, OakNet, a site on law and abused older adults, employs similar processes on legal issues of abused older adults in non-institutional settings. All these projects use on-line consultation for discussing issues relating to the development and management of the project. Other non-gender-based groups and organizations that I have worked with in using online consultations include members of public legal education organizations, and community groups such as the Community University Partnership.

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## Overview

This article describes briefly the barriers that women's organizations experience in using the Internet. Although it is not easy to separate individual women and women's organizations, this article addresses the issues of organizations rather than individual women. It discusses how women's organizations can develop online consultation skills by participating in online consultations organized by non-governmental organizations. The main focus is on online public participation and the process for meaningful online citizen engagement. Online public participation refers to the process initiated by the government and includes online consultation and online citizen engagement. In summary, the article discusses strategies to consider in developing the capacity of women's groups for online public participation.

More and more women's organizations are using the Internet to disseminate information and promote their products and services. Women's organizations such as Womenspace, The Disabled Women's

Network Ontario and the National Association of Women and the Law are publishing information and creating online communities using the unique features of the Internet. Other organizations such as the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters and Changing Together: A Centre for Immigrant Women have collaborated with the Legal Studies Program at the University of Alberta to develop web-based learning objects for women to learn legal issues relating to partner abuse. There are women's electronic networks using mailing lists and a web-based discussion forum such as Par-L to connect women and to discuss women's issues. The Internet transcends geographical distance and enlarges the circle of sharing and influence and, in some ways, the development of shared knowledge.

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## **Where are the barriers?**

While more and more women are using the Internet, women and women's organizations are still facing many barriers, including time, money, culture, literacy, computer literacy, and lack of appreciation for the value of the Internet. The digital divide, that is, the gap between those who have and those who do not have access to electronic information and communication technology (ICT), specifically the Internet, has been a subject of many studies. These studies have taken two different foci: 1) connectivity, and 2) variables of interest, such as ICT literacy and skills, knowledge levels, and socio-economic factors (Sciadas, 2002). These two foci are certainly applicable to women's organizations.

Many of the smaller women's equality-seeking organizations do not have the resources to train their staff and volunteers to use the Internet. Thus the digital divide that exists for them encompasses both connectivity issues and the variables of interest. Although conditions are changing, there are still many women's organizations that do not have the resources to have computers and connection to the Internet. For those who have Internet connectivity, many of them are not able to give their staff time to learn how to use it.

In Canada, while there are free public access terminals, lack of privacy at the public access terminal, lack of skills in using the computer and the Internet, and the distance to travel from home inhibit women from using these terminals. For most women, especially marginalized women, actual connectivity is not the key barrier. Lack of time and the opportunity to learn how to use a computer, and low literacy are more limiting barriers compared to accessibility. Solutions are needed to help women address issues of accessibility and connectivity, and more importantly, computer skill development and general literacy.

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## **Is the government open?**

In 1999, the Government of Canada made a commitment to become "known around the world as the government most connected to its citizens, with Canadians able to access all government information and services online at the time and place of their choosing". (Government Online) Since then the

Government has set a target of putting the most frequently used services online by 2005. Government Online (GOL) was established as an initiative to use information and communication technology to provide Canadians with enhanced access to improved citizen-centred, integrated services, anytime, anywhere, and in the official language of their choice.

As the Canadian government moves into e-government, the Internet is becoming an important tool to access government services. E-government generally refers to the use of the Internet and computer resources to provide government services. For most women who are already using the Internet, accessing online government services may prove to be convenient and time saving. For those who do not have the skills and access to the Internet, online services further widen the digital divide. Many women need to have opportunities to learn more about the Internet in order to use government services.

Putting frequently used services online is only the beginning of e-government. The Canadian government intends to use the Internet to inform and consult Canadians on public policy issues. The Privy Council Office is working with other federal departments to develop online participation processes in the Canadian government.

In *Policy Statement and Guidelines for Public Participation*, the Department of Justice Canada defines “public participation primarily [as] processes of public consultation and citizen engagement.” Although it does not refer specifically to the tools (face-to-face or online) to be used in the process, this definition provides the foundation for citizen participation in policy development. “Consultation refers to the processes through which government seeks the views of individuals or groups on policies, programs, services that affect them directly or in which they have a significant interest.” Examples of public consultation include both individual and group processes such as public meetings, advisory committees, polling, and focus groups.

Citizenship engagement seeks reflective and more in-depth deliberation and dialogue, requires greater time commitments, and focuses on a common ground (Department of Justice Canada, Wyman et al, 1999). Through in-depth deliberation and dialogue, citizen engagement has greater potential to develop civic capacity. Examples of citizen engagement include study circles and on-going public dialogues.

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## Is an opinion an opinion?

Regardless of the tools used to involve citizens in policy issues, central to public participation is the development of a critical understanding of the issue. Citizens not only need to have access to information about social policy that affects them, but this information needs to be in a context that makes sense to them. In order to participate in public dialogue that allows for deliberation, they need first to develop “informed public judgement” rather than “top of mind opinion” (Wyman et al, 1999).

To develop informed public judgement, citizens need to have a space where they can come together to learn, listen, deliberate, reflect, and formulate positions. It takes time to be reflective and yet it is essential to effective public participation. Wolfe (1989) poses that “the problem in modern liberal democracies is not that ordinary people do not have a say, but rather it is so easy for them to say what they prefer without being forced to think through the consequences of their opinions on others” (p.219). Giving citizens a chance to voice their opinion through e-polling or e-survey forms most likely results in “top of mind opinion” or opinion that has not been deliberative. These results need to be used with caution.

Meaningful citizen participation requires more than giving citizens opportunity to voice their opinion. It requires having a process that enables the citizens to take ownership of the process and the results. Having a process that is transparent fosters trust building that is central to the development of ownership. This means assisting them to acquire information on the issue and incorporating it into the personal and collective knowledge network. This process helps to ensure that citizens enter into a consultation or engagement with government with more than their own experiences or the experiences of those with whom they agree (Coleman & Goetz, 2002). The goal should be to have citizens enter into online public participation as “informed informers” (Coleman & Goetz, 2002).

As the Canadian government moves from using the Internet to provide access to information to using the Internet to involve the public in policy discussion, the need to develop Internet skills and knowledge of women’s organizations becomes more critical. To develop the capacity of women’s organizations to participate in online consultation and citizen engagement, one needs to start where the organization is with its use of the Internet.

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## **Moving toward online participation**

Non-profit organizations go through a gradual process of incorporating the Internet in their day-to-day affairs. Gilbert describes activist environmental organizations tending to go through three phases of Internet use: experimental retrieval, broadcast power, and interactive dialogue (Spencer, 2002). Women’s groups operate similarly, with the addition of using the Internet, particularly email, for communication. They tend to start by using email, move to using the Web for information retrieval, and then develop a web presence containing information similar to their organization brochures. With some organizations, the site remains that of an electronic brochure while others may include interactive activities, such as mail lists, and web-based discussion forums. Currently, more organizations are considering using the Internet for volunteer recruitment and fundraising.

Small non-profit women’s groups with limited resources are unable to expand their use of the Internet. In some cases, they do not have the time to invest in learning and using the Internet. They rely heavily on volunteers in their use of the Internet, so knowledge may not be maintained in the organization as volunteers come and go. With competing demands and limited resources, new tasks can

be considered daunting.

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## **Recognizing the tools to build informed opinion**

By demonstrating that online public participation is an extension of their Internet usage and that it is their right to have a voice in social policy, organizations may see the need to participate. Training and mentoring are important components of this argument. As with any change, this can be a slow process. When the organization perceives the importance and benefits of the shift, however, it finds time to learn and participate.

Although limited technology skills may hinder initial participation, online consultation is not about technology. It is about learning to be active citizens through awareness and understanding of a social issue and through participation in civic activities. It is about critically analyzing the issue, reflecting, and articulating a formulated opinion. In an online environment, it is about sharing the understanding, building on each other's understanding, discussing differing opinions, finding common ground, and synthesizing to develop informed judgement.

The online consultation, "Women, Communication Rights and the Net," organized by Womenspace in October 2002 exemplified a transparent process. The purpose and the process were described on the web site. The summary and the conclusion of the consultation were synthesized in a report that was presented at the Expert Meeting sponsored by the UN Division for the Advancement of Women in Korea, November 2002, and is available online. Addressing the issue of inclusiveness, Womenspace incorporated an off-line strategy of surveying and working with women not online to gather their opinions and comments about using the Internet.

Online citizen engagement has to be viewed as an iterative process. Thus there is a need to have an electronic space where general discussion can take place and reflective comments can be developed and voiced over time. This space is best hosted and facilitated by non-governmental organizations to engender the sense of ownership by the participants. This on-going general discussion space may not always be active, but its presence will encourage discussion of issues as they emerge.

One space of this kind is VIOLETForum, initially funded by the Status of Women Canada and now maintained by the Legal Studies Program. VIOLETForum was created as an informal virtual space for women to share their stories, to share information, to discuss issues, and to provide input to public policy on family violence and women. This was planned as an introductory step in capacity building for women and women's groups to enter into the government's online public participation.

When our experience showed that the women's groups were too busy and would come together only when there was a scheduled event, VIOLETForum organized a private time and issue-specific discussion in 2001 with 41 participants registered. The private online consultation was very successful

with the participants agreeing to continue and develop a plan of action. This illustrated the need to recognize the lack of time and energy to maintain momentum in an on-going discussion and to organize occasional time-specific engagement sessions to ensure broad and meaningful participation. The women felt able to commit to a specific time period for participation. By having a series of time-specific sessions on emerging issues at different times, the power of online citizen engagement is demonstrated.

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## Tips for organizers

The organizers (government and non-government) of online participation activities set the tone and the foundation of its success. Some tips critical to building the foundation are:

- communicate the purpose, context and process;
- select a model that matches the purpose;
- focus on topic, not technology;
- build an online community;
- get support from the government and the community;
- disseminate content and report results;
- provide skills/capacity building for the participants.

(Cliff, 2002; Poland, 2001)

Citizen engagement is about building government-citizen relationships. Fundamental to this relationship is mutual trust and respect. To use online citizen engagement as a tool to build this relationship, the elements of transparency, accessibility, accountability, and inclusiveness are key. With limited time and resources, participation of women and women's groups in online consultation is very much influenced by how the results will be used. It is important, therefore, for the organizers to communicate the purpose, the process (including what will be done with the results of the consultation), and the next steps after the engagement process. Without stated clear purpose and direction, it is more of a challenge to convince organizations to participate fully in the process.

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## Strategies that set the stage for success

In synthesizing what I have learned about online consultation and public participation through participation and research, I am offering some strategies for developing capacity in women's groups for online public participation:

- Implement a transparent process;

An online public participation event should clearly state its purpose, background information, expected end results, and opportunities for further input.

- Choose technology that is simple and easy to use without sacrificing security and privacy; Online participation activity is not about the technology. Technology is only a tool for communication and information. Participants need to know how to use the tool, but the most important skill is that of reflective thinking.
- Incorporate opportunities for learning through participation;  
By partnering with women's organizations, the government could provide resources for them to establish and facilitate an on-going online consultation space. This space would provide the opportunity for women to practice and develop their skills.
- Encourage the use of a community-centred development process;  
Shared ownership of the consultation process and the online space is critical to the success of online consultation. Using a community-centred development process provides the community with the opportunity to offer inputs that may shape the consultation and the results.
- Ensure that plain-language materials are made available before and during the consultation;
- Provide enough time and resources to encourage participation;
- Use early adopters to train and mentor other women and women's groups in developing individual and organization's online public participation skills. (Government could provide financial resources to these early adopters.);
- Broaden the representation of diversity online;  
For online public participation to reflect the diverse cultural background of Canadian citizens, there is a need to have an integrated approach that includes offline participation. Facilitators could assist those who are not proficient in English or French to post online. There could be offline consultations conducted in different languages. Reports from these offline consultations could then be compiled, translated into English and/or French and then be posted online.
- Recognize limitations of tools such as polls, focus groups, and public meetings that gather top-of-mind responses;

These tools could be used as an assessment tool to test the terminologies, concepts, and information to be produced. The findings should be used only to assist with the design of online citizen engagement.

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